

The Builder.

No. CXV.

SATURDAY, APRIL 19, 1845.



THE demand for a museum illustrative of our national architecture is becoming louder, and must ultimately be listened to by those who are in authority:—a collection of casts chronologically arranged, where the student may draw and compare, and so gain in a month a clearer understanding of the peculiarities which distinguish different epochs than he now does in the whole of his clerkship,—sometimes the whole of his life. Year after year the importance of obtaining such a collection has been urged by different individuals, but has been disregarded, and, in some quarters, laughed at; and, to the disgrace of succeeding governments be it said, no attempt even, has yet been made to form it. Two years ago Mr. E. B. Lamb addressed a very sensible letter on the subject to the trustees of the British Museum, praying them to provide in their new building an extension of accommodation for British antiquities, so that works of British art, from the earliest to the latest periods, might be arranged in the national museum. He pointed out, that specimens judiciously procured from various parts of the country, and arranged in chronological order, would enable the architectural student to gain such a knowledge of the forms of ornaments, mouldings, and sculpture, as could not be obtained from the objects themselves in their original position. The distinctive characteristics of Gothic architecture being divided into numerous classes, and each style imperceptibly growing out of the other, the gradations are so delicate, and the peculiarities so minute, that without a place for the reception of well-selected examples, the student is put to considerable labour and expense before he can acquire any knowledge of that part of the art; and then only by unwearied exertions, and the examination of many edifices.

The answer he received was, "The trustees are not prepared to recommend her Majesty's Government to provide in the museum for any general collection of remains of the Gothic architecture of Great Britain," and there the matter stopped. An outbuilding, a mere shed, would have been something, and might at once have been filled with actual relics and casts, at present put away in holes and corners. At the Royal Academy, for example, a considerable number are stowed away in a cellar simply for want of a proper receptacle. But no, the trustees were not prepared to recommend that any attempt should be made to meet the want which was felt, and advance the study of our national architecture.

At the last meeting of the Institute of Architects, a paper on this same subject was read, as will be seen in another part of the present number of our journal, and was warmly responded to. It was then suggested, that the Institute should not simply look on and wish, but should come forward and act; and we sincerely hope that the suggestion will not be disregarded.

Mr. Wyse, we understand, is about to bring the matter before Parliament, and now, therefore, is the time for all who feel how advantageous such a collection would be to petition

the legislature, and otherwise assist the endeavour so far as they may be able.

It is not simply to the professional inquirer that such a museum would have great attractions. Architecture now occupies the attention of a much larger class than it formerly did. Many now say with Chateaubriand,—"It cannot be denied that architecture, considered as an Art, is in its principle eminently religious—it was invented for the worship of the Deity, and those who had a multitude of gods, were led to different kinds of edifices, according to the ideas which they entertained of the different powers of those gods:" and with this feeling have commenced the study of it earnestly. Look also at our carvers, modellers, glass painters, and other decorative artists, now coming into more active existence, to whom such a collection would be of the first importance, and it must be seen that a very large section of the public would hail the establishment of a museum of national architecture as a boon.

For a continuation of the subject, we refer to the following article.

THE PRESERVATION OF NATIONAL ANTIQUITIES.*

"You, too, proceed! make falling arts your care,
Erect new wonders, and the old repair!"

UNDER the conviction that specimens of mediæval art still remaining in England are more numerous, and of more interesting character, than generally supposed, even by many antiquaries, we have endeavoured to give some notion of the extent to which examination, and the immediate prevention of further destruction is needed. The necessity for something more than individual exertion is great and pressing, as well to preserve antiquities of national value, as to rescue ourselves from the reproach of being the only one among modern nations, wanting in the proper estimation of records of such interest and importance. Associations for objects of an antiquarian nature have either lost the vigour of their youth, departed greatly from the objects of their foundation, or are consuming valuable time in disputes, ridiculous in their origin, but not on that account the less interminable. The Society of Antiquaries does nothing more than publish transactions, and hold weekly conversations, though its long standing, and the great names it boasts, gives it the opportunity of effecting a considerable amount of good. The committee of the Cambridge Camden Society, because not seconded in practices foreign to its ostensible purpose, have threatened to break up the whole body, thus at the same time concluding the only approximation to an effectual supervision of mediæval remains, that we have experienced. Lastly, the British Archaeological Association, from which so much was expected, is likely to end its days in contention on matters having no bearing upon the real objects of the institution. Thus, the fate impending over our cathedrals and churches is as lowering as ever, and the necessity for the immediate attention of the Government at once apparent. It may indeed afford matter for surprise, that while the Governments of foreign states are actively employed in upholding the decaying fabrics, and in furthering the pursuit of art in their respective countries, ours rather holds such matters to be without the sphere of the duties of a minister. But an enlightened administration will surely advance in this path it has already indicated, and willingly bear any practical suggestions for the attainment of an end of such manifest importance.

The systematic examination and description of those treasures of art with which this country is enriched, while adding to the antiquary new objects of interest and investigation, could not but advantageously influence the ornamental and decorative branches of art, and add new data for the elucidation of obscure points in British history. No longer confined to the biography of monarchs, and to the picture of martial strife; history, in the hands of its true illustrators, treats the condition of the

serf and the peasant as having a stronger claim, than that of the noble and the potentate; the history of a country is the history of the people who dwell in it, their manners, civilization, and arts, not of a section of its rulers. The historian, Gibbon, felt the importance of placing history in this light, and in the absence of other annals than those of princes and signors, derived from architectural monuments and kindred sources, materials for a narration, highly suggestive of the state of society in Italy, during the eventful times of which he wrote. The writer has elsewhere said:—"The architecture of Egypt in its paintings and hieroglyphics, in its long and gloomy vistas, and its avenues of sphinxes, is a lasting petrification of the manners and customs of the people, and of the domination of that mysterious hierarchy who sat in judgment over the dead, and who curbed the flights of imagination in architecture and in sculpture by inviolable regulations. The porticos and sculptures of Greece are evidences of the refinement of a nation, who responded to the works of its artists as to the creations of the dramatist and the reasoning of the philosopher; while the sumptuous edifices of the Romans speak of the pomp of imperial sway, and the slavery of subject states. The architecture of every country and of every age is vocal with the inmost workings of its creating mind; and it occupies the place of written history in points, which, though of the highest interest, historians have, for the most part, failed to touch. Every village church is a key to the history of the surrounding district; from its effigies, its sepulchral brasses, and its heraldic enrichments, the topographer and the genealogist may derive important data for the prosecution of researches into the history of a county, and of its principal inhabitants. The very age and body of the time are manifest in each feature, and in the minute details are related even the passions and the animosities of the different orders of the priesthood." The writer of British history seldom versed in matters of art, has made little use of the means at his disposal in architecture and antiquity: ignorant of the skill, which the works of mediæval artists evince, he has set forth the period anterior to the Reformation as entirely dark and illiterate. But the succeeding historian will fall short of his task unless he investigate the architecture of the country, and the numerous branches of art which that architecture called into play; and the number of those engaged in antiquarian topics is now so great, that the minister who, in emulation of Mons. Guizot, when Minister of Public Instruction in France, should do what he did for the examination and description of the antiquities of the country, could not but deserve well of all promoters of truthful representation, and greatly add to his political influence. The "Comité Historique des Arts et Monuments," founded by the French minister, has been for some time in active operation. Under the term "historical monuments" were included not only literary documents, but monuments of art; and it was proposed to publish, by degrees, a complete antiquarian survey of France, with descriptions and delineations of all its monuments. The commission has been divided into two comités—one for historical documents, and the other called the "Comité des Arts et Monuments." The latter has already issued several popular treatises on different branches of archaeology, in the form of instructions for its numerous correspondents, as well as more lengthened and learned dissertations. The good thus effected has been great and permanent; it has already led to that active spirit of preservation with which France is actuated, and which the Government does every thing to second; and with the assistance of the "Société Française pour la Conservation des Monuments Historiques," will shortly remove at least the visible traces of that revolution to which the country owes the destruction of its monuments, as well as the alteration of its political institutions. The "Société Française" was established about nine years ago by that enlightened antiquary M. de Caumont, of Caen, in Normandy; and now, by its repeated

* Vide "Some Observations on propriety of style particularly with reference to the modern adaptation of Gothic Architecture," a paper read at the Royal Institute of British Architects, June 26th, 1843, reported in the "Civil Engineer's Journal."